



“Far from Idle”: An Early-Twentieth-Century Farm Wife Makes Do

A neighbor remembered three things about Carrie Somers: “One, she was efficient; I mean practical. She built her kitchen, you know. Two, she was a good woman, very religious. And three, she was strict.”

By LORNA QUIMBY

How short a time what a woman does lasts! The kitchen she plans so carefully will be rearranged and redecorated by the next owner, who cannot imagine how her predecessor put up with this awkwardness or that inefficiency. Every woman marks her territory, especially her kitchen, by some distinguished touch, which in turn will be removed or altered by the next inhabitant when she makes her imprint.

There yet remains one house in Peacham that bears unmistakable signs of its former occupant, although this soon will be gone as the home where Caroline Knight Morrison Somers lived from around 1900 to 1965 is now for sale. For years it was lovingly cared for by her daughter and known throughout the town for Carrie Somers’s kitchen and the other rooms in the old farmhouse, all full of the vitality and artistry of this Vermont woman.

“What do you remember about Carrie Somers?” I asked a former South Part neighbor. “I remember three things,” the woman replied. Succinctly she listed them. “One, she was efficient; I mean, practical. She

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Caroline ("Carrie") Knight Morrison Somers at age 64, (1938). Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Marilyn Hagen Petrie.

built her kitchen, you know. Two, she was a good woman, very religious. And three, she was strict.”

It is interesting that the first trait this neighbor listed was Carrie’s efficiency. Most people said, “She was a good woman” when asked the same question. Carrie was known as a devout, deeply religious woman, who started her days singing hymns, kept the Sabbath, and welcomed and fed the lonely, hungry wayfarers who came to her door. She nursed the sick and made a home for an elderly friend. Part of her goodness was the strictness she was also known for. “She was meek, but she was strong. She couldn’t be swayed at all.”¹

Carrie was also known as a “good worker,” high praise in a community that valued the contribution a good worker made. Other women in the community also carried that badge of distinction, but, “she built her kitchen, you know.” A woman in the early twentieth century who did her own carpentry made an impression on her neighbors. This impression stemmed from her kitchen and its construction, and it is part of her children’s memories of their mother as well.

The Somers family had not always lived on the farm in the South Part of Peacham. On October 30, 1901, Lee Somers and Caroline Knight Morrison were married; Carrie, as she was called, was twenty-seven years old. They started their family on a farm in the town of Groton,

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The Somers family farm house, in South Part, Peacham. Note the sun porch on the right and the small porch over the front door left. Photograph by Marilyn Hagen Petrie, 2002. Courtesy of the photographer.

not far from the Groton-Peacham line. By 1915 they had eight children, three boys and five girls.² In November of 1913 they bought the farm in Peacham, for Peacham's schools were better than Groton's. The South Part school stood just down the hill from this home. When they reached the higher grades, their children could drive a horse or walk to the Peacham Academy. A three-mile walk to the academy was considered acceptable, for children at that time were expected to walk a mile to school as a matter of course.

The new house was large, with seven bedrooms for their growing family, but the kitchen was small. As the family grew, the kitchen seemed smaller and smaller.

One day in the early 1920s, accounts of the exact year vary, Carrie decided she needed more kitchen space. "She said to Dad, 'I want you to put a floor and a ceiling out in the woodshed.'" ³ Little did Lee realize what would come from that quiet request.

The oldest girls worked in the barn, for farming was labor-intensive. Every hand was needed. Carrie herself had helped with the milking until the children grew big enough to help. When the two middle girls became old enough to work, Carrie insisted that Ruth and Neverlie help her in the house. These young girls did the kitchen work while their

mother was building the kitchen. Her tools were the simplest: “a hammer, a hand saw, and a square and nails, and that was it.”⁴

“Do it yourself,” she told her children. “Don’t wait for someone to do it for you.”⁵ Carrie brought windows, boards, and doors from their former home for use in her new kitchen. Also, “Dad cut his own trees for lumber and usually had a big stack so Mom could help herself.”⁶ Carrie put some of the windows in the back of the kitchen and used others for doors for her china closet. She made the drawers underneath the counters. She installed barrels on rollers for flour and sugar. She used cupboard doors from her old kitchen for her new one. She salvaged the iron sink, too, so she had a big iron sink—at least four feet long—and a second smaller one. “Mother didn’t want the men washing up in the sink where she did the dishes—though she used to clean the vegetables in the sink where the men washed.”⁷ She located the sinks near the stove, no small consideration when all water had to be heated on top of the stove. Later on, a coil in the stove heated the water, which was then stored in a tank.

In the corner by the big wood-burning cookstove, Carrie built two settees—places to sit near the heat—with a woodbox under one and a place for boots under the other.

Next Carrie decorated her kitchen walls. She painted designs over the base coat on the walls, not with stencils but by hand. White flowers with green leaves and stems grew from brick-red flowerpots at regular intervals over the creamy tan background. The design allowed the viewer to see where the boards meet under the paint.

Carrie’s new kitchen was a large, cheerful room, with counter space for the endless cooking, places to sit near the stove, and a dining area.

Carrie built the family’s first indoor bathroom by dividing their former small kitchen into a bathroom and a closet for everyday coats and boots. As soon as the plumber finished his work, Carrie painted the bathroom with a design of white flowers with a red dot in the center, placed hit-or-miss over the blue background. Again she did this free-hand, without using a stencil. The finishing touch is the border of white lacy lines that look like a crocheted border around the top of the walls. No other house in Peacham sported this artwork.

“You can do anything you want to if you want it badly enough,”⁸ she would say. Carrie wanted a summer porch. It isn’t hard to imagine what it was like in summertime in the kitchen with the wood-burning cookstove adding its extra warmth to the heat of the day. So, the summer before the flood of 1927, Carrie built her sunporch on the westerly side of the house. It opened from the kitchen, and all summer long the family

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Carrie Somers's kitchen. The china closet and cupboard incorporated windows and doors from the family's previous farmhouse. Photograph by John Somers, 2003. Courtesy of the photographer.

gathered there for their meals. She also enclosed the back porch and later added another over the front door.

Lee remarked, "I'm always glad the woodshed was between the barn and the house, or she would have built the kitchen right out to the barn."⁹

Carrie needed a covering for her sunporch floor. A worn carpet, twelve feet square turned upside down, gave her a sturdy canvas base on which she painted a background coat and then a design. A coat of varnish finished her floor covering. When one design wore off, she painted another.

"Mom used to tell Dad and me what she wanted to accomplish. Then she would start right in."¹⁰

Carrie always tried to improve her children's home and make living easier for them. She decorated the rooms, hanging wallpaper and painting the floors. Some of her floor decorations were simple spatter repeat patterns, others had squares with leaves, birds, or flowers alternating with the plain squares of the colored background. She took three surrey

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For her new kitchen, Carrie Somers built two settees and hand painted the walls. Daughter Gwendolyn Somers Hagen stands in the doorway. Photograph by John Somers, 2003. Courtesy of the photographer.

seats to the blacksmith, told him what she wanted for irons, and put rockers on them. She then made cushions. Carrie's descendants still rock on the sunporch on the seats she made, and when the house is sold, they will take these rocking settees to their homes.

In the 1930s she built their lawn chairs and a seat around one of the maple trees in front of the house. She drew her own patterns for these. She made a lawn glider, and how fascinating this was to visiting children! She painted all these pieces of lawn furniture a pure white to contrast with the green lawn.

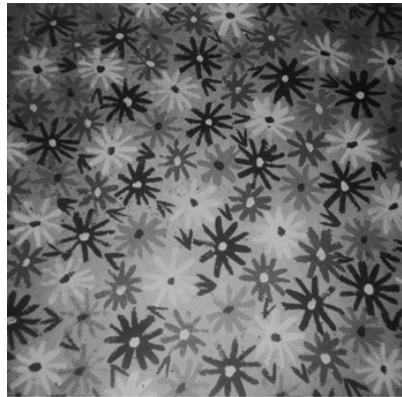
Carrie also drew or copied pictures that took her fancy. Her daughters and one son have the pictures of flowers, landscapes, and horses she created. Carrie also decorated the cards she mailed to her varied correspondents.

Her carpentry and art work made Carrie stand out in the neighborhood. Peacham farm wives took it as a matter of course that they made

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Details of Carrie's hand-painted wood floors: a simple pattern in the dining room (left) and a more complicated pattern with leaves, birds, and flowers and geometrical designs (above). Photographs by John Somers, 2003. Courtesy of the photographer.



all the children's clothes, sewed sheets out of strips of unbleached muslin, made patchwork quilts, and braided and hooked rugs using traditional designs. Carrie, however, created her own designs for her rugs and quilts. Here again, she used the material at hand—old coats and skirts too worn for wearing, remnants left from dressmaking, all those bits that were too good to throw away. She also made her own mattresses

out of ticking stuffed with hay, straw, and corn husks. Carrie sometimes worked late into the night to finish a project.

Her “projects,” as her family called them, were done piecemeal amid all the daily and seasonal chores of a farm wife, in the intervals between visits from relatives and neighbors and interruptions when she was away tending the sick.

Along with the hammering, sewing, sawing, and painting went the cooking, the housework, tending the garden, raking the hay in summer, and doing milking occasionally when her husband was absent.

The cooking itself was a formidable task. Her daughter Ruth remembers a Saturday’s baking:

We baked eight or nine loaves of bread, two kinds of cookies (molasses and filled), eight pies (fresh or dried apple pie, pumpkin pie, custard pie, and berry pies in season), a pot of baked beans, steamed brown bread, and two cakes in a huge rectangular pan which would hold about four of the cake recipes of today. There were six eggs in each cake. We also fried doughnuts. After doing all that cooking on Saturday, we got up on Monday and started all over again!¹¹

How good those cookies tasted—soft ginger cookies with a sweet raisin filling. Her oldest daughter Gwen cherishes the cookie cutter Carrie used: a 3½-inch can cover with “Bake it Best with Absolutely Pure Davis” imprinted on the top.

And her doughnuts! Carrie would bring a plate heaped with her doughnuts, warm, fragrant, and dusted with sugar, to the children playing in the front yard. Carrie was famous for her doughnuts. “Someone would telephone to say ‘we’re having an auction. We need five hundred doughnuts,’ and Mom would cook them.”¹² When the doughnuts grew stale, Carrie steamed them and served them with a sour sauce for a dessert. “We kids can still remember the flavor.”¹³

Carrie mixed her bread dough “in the biggest dishpan I ever saw,” her daughter-in-law writes.¹⁴ She used potato yeast that she made herself, using a bit from the last batch as a starter, the way other women made sourdough yeast. She scooped her flour from the barrels she had installed. All were baked in the big oven of the Home Comfort range, which made the kitchen toasty warm in winter and unbearably hot in summer.

This was just the baking. Carrie and her two helpers, her middle daughters, cooked three square meals each day. For breakfast, she prepared oatmeal, steaming on the back of the stove, fried potatoes, eggs, “a foot-high stack of toast,”¹⁵ and pie, if anyone had room for it. The grandchildren remember the taste of the leftover buttered toast, which Carrie put to dry in the warming oven over the range and which the children could eat for snacks. At noon the family ate another big meal.

In summer Carrie served peas or string beans cooked with new potatoes, sometimes cooked with salt pork. The family picked from the vines and shelled a bushel of peas for one meal. Carrie added thick Jersey cream and butter to the cooked vegetables. The family had the usual produce in summer: radishes, lettuce, cucumbers, squash, carrots, and beets. In the evening there was supper, as it was called then, with fried potatoes and vegetables. In the fall Carrie served tomatoes for supper and “added bread to increase the quantity so there would be plenty for all of us.”¹⁶ At every meal, pies, cakes, doughnuts, and cookies filled in any empty crevices. Her daughter-in-law remembers “how flabbergasted I was to find glass jars full of doughnuts and cookies on the table at all times. A doughnut or a cookie could be popped in one’s mouth at any time.”¹⁷

The family didn’t eat much meat. Few farm families in Peacham did. Sometimes they had pork from the pigs, served as the ubiquitous salt pork, and “Dad bought meat with bones in it from Ray Cooley who came around with the butcher’s cart.”¹⁸ Carrie cooked the meat off the bones and served it in gravy. For another source of protein, Carrie made “milk gravy,” which cookbooks of the time placed in the section for recipes under “medium white sauce.” Each Peacham farm wife had her variation on the basic combination of butter, flour, salt, and milk. Some made the equivalent of paste in taste and appearance. Others served their families an attractive, tasty sauce with golden flecks of butter and specks of pepper, or the secret spice they used to make a special dish, floating on the snowy surface. On one memorable occasion, Carrie served her family a small pig that she stuffed and roasted whole.¹⁹

Although fresh produce was available in the market most of the time, Carrie and Lee raised all the fruits and vegetables their family ate during the year. “Dad planted the big stuff—peas, beans, corn, squash, potatoes, and cucumbers. Mom planted the beets, greens, lettuces, radishes, tomatoes, and string beans.”²⁰ That is to say, Lee planted the beans that were dried for baking. Carrie prepared her garden herself, digging out the sods, because a wall came too close to her plot for plowing with the horses. As Carrie dug out the “witch grass,”²¹ the children dragged it away for her. Carrie used the turf and the stubborn grass to build a terrace while she was freeing her garden of weeds. She set out raspberry and strawberry plants. Marilyn Hagen Petrie, one of Carrie’s granddaughters, remembers getting up in the morning and going in her bare feet on the cold wet grass to where her grandmother was working in the garden. Carrie rose at the “crack of dawn”²² and worked in the cool outdoors, her clear soprano voice raised in a hymn of praise, until the men and the girls who helped in the barn had finished their chores and were ready

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Carrie and Lee Somers's family, ca. 1918. Back row: Gwendolyn, Leeland, Dwight, Beulah; Front: Ruth, Lee holding Gilmore, Eunice, Carrie, Neverlie. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Marilyn Hagen Petrie.

for breakfast. Both gardens were large, for Carrie canned for the winter. The neighboring women described with awe the hundreds of quarts “Carrie Somers and her girls” had canned.

The family slept in six double beds and two twin-sized beds in the seven bedrooms. A household of eight children and at least two, most of the time three and four, adults produced a mountain of laundry: clothes, used towels and washcloths, and bedding. Wash day on Monday for Carrie meant boiling and scrubbing by hand. Later she scrubbed clothes with an EasyWasher from Sears, Roebuck and Company. In this laborsaver, a woman pushed her clothes back and forth in a galvanized tub with a wooden agitator. “Easy” indeed! In 1940 her daughter Gwen gave her mother a washing machine run by a gasoline motor, for it was not until 1946 that the Rural Electrification Act brought electric power to the farm. Carrie looked askance at the modern contraption. “Give me a good wood stove and an old scrub board, and I can keep things clean.”²³

After the washing on Monday, Carrie ironed on Tuesday. She heated the irons on the Home Comfort stove. The irons were called “sad-irons,” meaning that they were solid, not hollow—not that they made the user unhappy. She ironed all the sheets and folded them. “She was

particular about a lot of things. The men's shirts had to be folded just so."²⁴ How many times her daughters heard:

All that you do, do with your might.
Things done by halves are never done right.²⁵

On Friday, Carrie went through the house, washing, scouring, and dusting. "One time Mom put on a pedometer, just to see how far she walked doing housework. She found she averaged seventeen miles a day."²⁶

"Make your head save your heels,"²⁷ she used to say. When painting designs on the floors, Carrie lay over the seat of a chair with its back gone, reaching the floor from this horizontal position. She sat down on one of the rockers on the sunporch while she peeled the potatoes for a meal—and how many there were to peel! No sooner had she finished the chore than she would say, "I must stir myself and get busy."²⁸

Besides her weekly chores, her carpentry and other big projects, Carrie made all the children's toys: rag dolls, stuffed animals, and toys out of spools. She sewed all the girls' dresses, coats, and underwear. She made their white graduation dresses. She ordered the material from the Sears, Roebuck or the Montgomery Ward catalogs, which many farm wives pored over, searching for the best buys.

There were no well-child clinics in those days. The doctor was called only when all else had failed. Carrie tended her children when they were sick. She used home remedies: catnip tea for upset stomachs, garlic for colds, and sugar and turpentine for pinworms. "In the spring of the year she gave us a tonic of sulphur and molasses. The sulphur made the molasses foam, and the molasses covered up the sulphur taste."²⁹

Carrie "was far from idle."³⁰ Her life was busy, but not frantic. Her day's work changed with the progression of the week, the wheel of the seasons, interspersed with time to pray, to sing, to play with her brood. As Peacham's highest praise for anyone goes, "She was a good worker." As well as her house and its kitchen, Carrie Knight Morrison Somers left her children a legacy. They, too, are known as doers, for they know from their mother's example "You can do anything you want to if you want it badly enough."

NOTES

¹ Marilyn Hagen Petrie, granddaughter, interview by author, Peacham, Vt., 21 February 1983.

² Jennie Chamberlain Watts and Elsie A. Choate, compilers, *People of Peacham* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1965), 278.

³ Ruth Somers Chandler, daughter, born 8 March 1911, interview by author, St. Johnsbury, Vt., 8 June 1983.

⁴ Eunice Somers Jurentkoff, daughter, born 12 October 1915, interview by author, West Barnet, Vt., 3 May 1983.

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⁵ Chandler, interview.

⁶ Neverlie Somers Murray, daughter, born 11 December 1912, letter to author, 14 June 1982.

⁷ Gwendolyn Somers Hagen, daughter, born 18 May 1907, interview with author, Peacham, Vt., April 1982.

⁸ Chandler, interview.

⁹ Hagen, interview.

¹⁰ Murray, letter.

¹¹ Chandler, interview.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Beulah Somers Gormley, daughter, born 30 June 1909, interview by author, Lyndonville, Vt., 22 June 1983.

¹⁴ Dorcas Wheeler Somers, married to Carrie's first child Leland, born 25 March 1904, letter to author, undated (1982).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gormley, interview.

¹⁷ Somers, letter

¹⁸ Jurentkoff, interview.

¹⁹ Chandler, interview.

²⁰ Gormley, interview.

²¹ Ernest L. Bogart, *Peacham, the Story of a Vermont Hill Town* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 315. Witch grass was introduced early into Peacham from England to provide good feed. Unfortunately, it was practically impossible to eradicate and became known as the farmer's curse.

²² Hagen, interview.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gormley, interview.

²⁵ Chandler, interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Murray, letter.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gormley, interview.

³⁰ Murray, letter.